

# Innovating contextual genres

## A strategy to sustain regional democratic relevance?

BIRGIT RØE MATHISEN

Nord University, Bodø  
Norway

[birgit.r.mathisen@nord.no](mailto:birgit.r.mathisen@nord.no)

LISBETH MORLANDSTØ

Nord University, Bodø  
Norway

[Lisbeth.morlandsto@nord.no](mailto:Lisbeth.morlandsto@nord.no)



Newsrooms are undergoing fundamental changes, at every level - local, regional, and national. Financial crisis, changing structural framework, new technology and audience behaviour all pose challenges for journalism. One of the essential questions is how these changes will affect the public role of journalism as a whole in democratic societies. Legacy news media has been criticized for lagging behind in digital innovation and rarely encouraging experimentation (Boczkowski 2004a: 51). Küng (2015), however, claims that the media industry always has been innovative. Storsul and Krumsvik (2013) likewise show that media innovation is concerned with both product as well as social innovation, the latter improving people's lives. Trappel (2015: 14) makes a similar argument, tying innovation to democracy and suggesting research on new technologies in communications should address their implications for democratic values.

Several studies have investigated media innovation, but few of them have examined it in the context of local and regional media, even though such media are challenged by digitization and digital convergence and are under pressure to innovate in order to sustain their relevance (Morlandstø & Krumsvik 2014, 20). The local press is important for local democracy and public debate (Høst 2005; Aalberg et al. 2015; Nielsen 2015) as well as local identity and

### Pour citer cet article, to quote this article, para citar este artigo :

B. Røe Mathisen, L. Morlandstø, « Innovating contextual genres. A strategy to sustain regional democratic relevance? », *Sur le journalisme, About journalism, Sobre jornalismo* [En ligne, online], Vol 7, n°2 - 2018, 15 décembre - December 15 - 15 de dezembro.  
URL : <http://www.surlejournalisme.com/rev>

belonging (Císarová 2017). In the European context, Norway stands out with its characteristically decentralised press structure, and by a high level of newspaper readership and circulation. Yet the Norwegian local and regional media are also affected by the crisis, and also feel the need to innovate in order to sustain their influence (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2018:6; Eide et al. 2016).

This exploration of innovations includes journalistic genres, as digital platforms convey new possibilities for develop old genres of journalism. Rapid changes in infrastructure and material platforms fostered by digitisation are constantly exposing and challenging the concepts of genre (Liestøl & Morrison 2016). This is also influencing the democratic value of journalistic content. Depending on genre, there has been a significant rise in contextual reporting in recent years (Esser & Umbricht 2014; McNair 2008; Fink & Schudson 2014), including opinion-based and explanatory journalism, among others. These changes are rooted in a need for contextualization brought about by the accelerating pace of the news cycle (Le Masurier 2015; Neveu 2016).

In this article, we discuss how regional newsrooms in Norway develop their commentary and explanatory genres online. Our research question is: *how do regional newsrooms in Norway use genre innovation to develop and sustain their societal role in a democratic public sphere?* Our goal is to address how genre development might contribute to the understanding of the socio-political function of regional journalism in the digital age and to investigate how journalists and editors in regional media speak of their role in this period of rapid and fundamental change.

We base our analysis on two case studies: one examines online opinion-based journalism at the regional newspaper *Nordlys* and its innovative product *Nordnorsk debatt*.<sup>1</sup> The other looks at the online site *Brif*<sup>2</sup> presented by the regional newspaper *Bergens Tidende*, which publishes explanatory journalism aimed at a younger audience. The article is based on interviews with editors and journalists in both newsrooms.

The article is organized as follows. First, we outline the background and describe the typical features of the Norwegian media landscape. We then explore the theoretical framework, institutional perspectives on journalism, and the concepts of innovation and genre. Next, we draw up the context for the two cases we study and describe our data and methods. Finally, we turn to our analysis and a discussion of our findings.

---

## BACKGROUND

---

Readership and circulation have remained high in Norway compared to other Western countries (Høst 2017; Vaage 2017). One important reason for this is the decentralized nature of Norwegian media. This reflects Norway's elongated geography, which has produced many small municipalities and a scattered pattern of settlement. As of late 2016, no fewer than 227 newspapers were being published in 186 different cities and communities; both national press published in the capital Oslo as well as local and regional press spread across the country (Høst 2017: 5). As Norwegian newspapers transition to digital platforms, the number of digital subscribers has grown, and online news readership overtook print readership in 2014 (Vaage 2017).

Researchers have characterized the local press as the “*spine*” or “*backbone*” of the Norwegian media (Høst 2005; Mathisen 2010). Nielsen (2015) has described them as “*keystone*” elements of the political information environment because they enable secondary coverage by other media and thus have ecological consequences that reach well beyond their own audiences. Scholars regard this local and regional media as vital for local democracy, citizenship, and public debate (Franklin 2006; Mathisen 2010; Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016; Engan 2016) and consider them to be mediators of local culture and identity (Skogerbø & Windsvold 2011; Aldridge 2007).

Hallin and Mancini (2009) describe both the Nordic and Central European media systems as a “*democratic corporatist*” model with several similar characteristics linked to political, social and economic structure. They underscore the high circulation of the local press as a characteristic feature of this model, advancing strong local patriotism as a possible reason (p. 150).

The stability of local newspapers may seem remarkable in a time of dramatic change in the media landscape (Morlandstø & Krumsvik 2014: 19), while at the same time Norway has also pioneered in the development of online newspapers (Ottosen 2015: 209). Yet circulation and readership are decreasing in Norway just as they are in other Western countries. The regional level has been more dramatically affected than the smallest local newspapers (Høst 2017). Since the 1990s, the regional press has narrowed its geographical scope, especially in news journalism, closing down several district offices and concentrating news

coverage within towns where they publish (Engan 2016; Sjøvaag 2015).

Local journalism is challenged all over Europe. Newspapers are going out of business (Williams et al. 2014, Ramsey & Gordon 2016), leaving communities and municipalities without local coverage (Howells 2016). As Nielsen (2015: 2) argues, local journalism, like journalism in general, is changing today as a part of a wider, technologically-driven structural transformation of the media environment. These shifts also underscore the necessity of considering local and regional media within a framework of innovation theory.

---

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

---

In this section, we elaborate the theoretical grounds for the study, drawing on both innovation theory and institutional theory. Journalism is committed to a societal mission (Peters & Broersma 2017). Within an institutional framework on media, Cook (1998: 83) emphasizes that the news media fulfil distinct needs in society: circulating information, enabling public debate and organizing the public sphere. Democracy, publishing technology and journalism are closely intertwined (McNair 2009: 238). Democracy presupposes a public discourse in which ideas and perceptions are freely debated. The news media is a vital institution that enables that public conversation (Aalberg et al. 2015: 26), facilitating society's collective knowledge (Allern & Pollack 2016: 33), as well as opinion making. Waldahl (2007) underscores the duty of the news media to serve society with relevant and trustworthy information in a democratic society, constituting the citizens' most important source for political knowledge and insight. The local and regional media facilitates these roles for local and regional publics and contextual genres are an essential part of how they are performing this institutional role. This brings us to a discussion of the contemporary development of journalistic genres.

### Genre development

There has been a significant rise in contextual journalism in recent years (Fink & Schudson 2014). *Commentary or opinion-based journalism*, one of the genres in our study, is rapidly growing all over the Western world (McNair 2008; Knapskog et al. 2016; Wahl-Joergensen & Hanitsch 2009; Salgado & Strömbäck 2012; Esser & Umbricht 2014). In a study of the development of both American and European journalism over recent decades, Esser & Umbricht (2014: 245) conclude that there has been a change in journalism

from observation to interpretation. The growth of commentary, however, has also been subject to criticism and public debate (Patterson 2000; McNair 2008), over the concern, among other things, that it is replacing fact-based and investigative journalism, further blurring borders between facts and opinions.

Knapskog et al. (2016: 165) argue that the commentary genre may be one of the keys to enable professional journalism to enter into a renewed contract with an increasingly demanding and fragmented audience. The regional media in Norway prioritizes commentary journalism. Columnists perceive their societal role as one of public education, critique, agenda setting, and regional patriotism—and their mission as that of a counter-voice, bringing local and regional issues and perspectives into the national public sphere (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016).

Explanatory journalism, the other genre we are examining, is also a growing. Roy Peter Clark originated the concept in his 1984 essay «*Making Hard News Easy Reading*», in which he offers strategies to make difficult subjects more digestible for readers.<sup>3</sup> A recent example of explanatory journalism is American journalist Lara Setrakian's Syria Deeply,<sup>4</sup> which conveys the background of the conflict in Syria through reporting, video, analysis, and maps.<sup>5</sup> The web, with its infinite space and variety of presentation techniques, provides completely new possibilities for this genre. The ambition in explanatory journalism is to uncover how a given news story is connected to other information and events in society. Researchers have linked this recent imperative, the need to contextualize the news, to the accelerated speed of the news cycle over the last few years into a nonstop, 24/7 digital stream (La Masurier 2015; Neveu 2016).

Opinion-based and explanatory journalism are different genres, but both seek to go beyond the mere reporting of news in the interest of context, explanation, analysis, and interpretation. Both genres are closely related to democratic values in terms of disseminating relevant information, facilitating a functional public sphere, and contributing to user participation. At the same time, the growth of these genres is also related to marketing decisions: contextual journalism is a niche that attracts and recruits readers.

### Media innovation

Innovation might be about developing genres. Steensen (2013: 49) discusses how innovation relates to genre. He is concerned with how genre theory sheds light on media development and how the

societal function of genres are being transformed by technology. Schumpeter (1939) made a distinction between invention and innovation, defining the latter as occurring only when an invention is successfully brought to market. Storsul and Krumsvik (2013: 14) introduce the concept of *social* innovation when conceptualizing advances in media, defining it as innovation that meets social needs and improves people's lives.

Scholars discuss what preconditions are essential to stimulate media innovation. Several argue that legacy news media have been slow to adopt new technologies and practices (Buczowski 2004a; Ryfe 2012). Ryfe (2012) characterizes American newsrooms as reluctant to embrace innovation, and further claims that journalists' habits often stand in the way of experimentation and change. Other essential preconditions for innovation include structural factors such as organization, work practices and user representation (Buczowski 2004b), professional culture and norms (Singer et al. 2011), and even the individual actions of key members of news teams (Steensen 2009). In a study of the development of the Norwegian local press from 1990 to 2010, Holand (2014) finds that, in addition to internal factors, pressure from outside of the industry provides vital motivation for media innovation. Küng (2013: 9) claims that successful organizations are characterized by a blend of journalistic, technological and commercial competencies. She contends that strong leadership, a culture that views digital platforms as an opportunity and understands the importance of technology, and the ability to adapt, are vital aspects of innovation (Küng 2015: 106). She recognizes, however, that most journalists are rooted in the pre-digital world, having "print in their blood."

Dogruel (2013: 29) understands media innovation as a multi-dimensional concept, based on interactions between the technological, economic and social dimensions of the field. Paulussen (2016: 195) highlights the importance of alignment between business and journalistic motives for innovation as a precondition for it to become accepted in newsrooms. Barnhurst (2013) criticizes the concept of innovation itself for being overly concerned with technology. He argues that rethinking journalism might require a different perspective on innovation, pointing to the utility of citizenship as a vital concept, a step that might make for better news and better politics (p. 218 ff). He argues that journalists need to distance themselves from product innovation and focus on serving citizenship and trust. This overlaps with the concept of social innovation discussed by Storsul & Krumsvik

(2013). As already mentioned, Trappel (2015: 13) also stresses the democratic perspective in relation to innovation, holding that media innovation must offer more than something new; it must provide something "better for social and democratic coherence."

---

## DATA AND METHODS

---

In the following, we will draw up the context of the two researched cases and then turn to a discussion of methods. *Nordlys* is published in the town of Tromsø, being the largest newspaper in the northern (or arctic) region of Norway. After the decline of the party press, opinion-based journalism and the facilitation of public debate became important as a means of legitimizing the institutional role of the press. Through the way it prioritizes news and through its columns, *Nordlys* has made regionalism its brand (Christensen & Tjelmeland 2002: 467ff). *Nordlys* launched its innovative online commentary platform *Nordnorsk debatt* online in 2014. The website is devoted to opinion-based content, editorial columns, and audience contributions. The site also provides an overview of which articles gain the most likes and shares on Facebook, and which ones are the most read. *Nordnorsk debatt* is run by an editorial staff of three, aided by the chief editor's columns and editorials.

*Bergens Tidende* is one of the oldest newspapers in Norway, published in the city of Bergen on the southwestern coast. Being the largest regional newspaper in Norway, the newsroom aims to be a distinctive journalistic voice in national debates (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016). The paper launched its online explanatory platform *Brif* in autumn 2014. The ambition was to make political journalism during county and community elections easier to understand, especially for young readers. *Brif* articles use simple sentences, illustrations or pictures and "listicles" or other kind of strategies to simplify the messages. Three journalists run *Brif*: one covers politics, one culture and the third crime.

Our interest in these two cases grew out of a previous, larger study we conducted about opinion-based journalism in regional media, involving six regional newspapers in Norway (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016). During this project, we were familiar with plans of implementing both *Brif* and *Nordnorsk debatt*. We found both of them interesting as innovative newsroom processes to study, well suited to address the implications for democracy of journalistic genre innovations at the regional level. The empirical data on which this article draws consists of individual semi-struct-

tured interviews with key stakeholders in these newsrooms, all of them strategically recruited in relation to their role and responsibility for *Brif* and *Nordnorsk debatt*. The interview data is comprised of six interviewees from each newsroom (including editors).

The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2015, in an early phase of both genre innovations. We also did follow-up interviews one year later. All of the interviews took place in the newsrooms of the two media businesses, and lasted about an hour each. The interviews focused on the rationale for these innovative genre projects in the newspapers, how they established and organized their work within the newsroom and what they perceive in retrospect as the most important advantages of these innovations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. To analyze the results, we coded the interviews according to themes and analyzed the utterances in relation to their ambition of strengthening the societal mission of journalism, and to contribute to a well-functional democratic public sphere.

One might object that a study of innovation should also contain an analysis of the content of the resulting journalism. While our larger study *does* contain content analysis as well as qualitative text analysis, this article draws on the interviews only, for the purpose of answering the question of how the newsrooms use genre innovation to develop and sustain their societal role. We focus here on how genre innovation is reflected and represented in the interviews and not on the extent to which this innovation might measure up to a given definition or how successful the innovation is by any objective standard.

---

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

---

We now turn to a discussion of our findings. In the first section, we examine how the informants relate to the innovation process. We then discuss how the informants perceive these genre innovations in relation to the institutional role of journalism. In the last part, we discuss the tensions between commerce and ideals, before concluding.

### Change as a necessity

Innovation is about change: a process that creates something new. At both *Brif* and *Nordnorsk debatt*, the interviewees describe their newsrooms as being in a state of constant change aimed at developing and improving the content of their products. In the interviews, the journalists and editors describe

their newsrooms processes with words such as *eternal process, constantly changing, unfinished, in a development phase, laboratory and hatchery* – all words describing something on the move. The editor of *Nordlys* underscored the incessantly developing character of *Nordnorsk debatt*, repeating that it was constantly being changed, that there were always elements to improve. In *Bergens Tidende*, one of the journalists described *Brif* as the means to transform into a digital media environment:

*“We do come from the world of print. The way we present our stories is still characterized by our print heritage. But we have succeeded in making Brif a hatchery for how to present good and relevant journalism in the new digital media environment.”*

This interviewee describes a newsroom where the professionals do have “print in their blood,” to paraphrase a *New York Times* journalist quoted by Küng (2015: 39). *Brif* has been an important tool for change, leading its journalists to experiment with new digital methods of presenting their stories. Unfulfilled plans, changes, and rearrangements are not perceived as problematic, but instead reflect the fact that the product is always a work in progress. This correlates with Singer et al.’s (2011) finding that an organization’s ability to adapt is a significant factor in a successful innovation. The newsrooms of both *Bergens Tidende* and *Nordlys* appear to be environments for change, for testing and improving, and are characterized by an adaptive attitude. Their journalists do not stand in the way of innovation and change (Ryfe 2012), nor can these two newsrooms be described as reactive or defensive (Boczkowski 2004a).

We acknowledge that our strategy of recruiting informants probably contributes to this finding. All of our informants do take part in an innovation, and contribute to developing something new in the newsroom – a task that almost inevitably will lead to a positive attitude, as it implies autonomy and creativity in work. Their colleagues in the same newsrooms, who are performing more routine work and have not been invited into this innovative process, might perceive the changes in quite a different way.

The innovation becomes a series of dynamics, mechanisms, means and changes that lead to a particular outcome (Siles and Boczkowski 2012: 193). One possible outcome might be described as internal and related to technology; making the newsroom itself more resilient in the digital age, with the genre development as a means to strengthen their digital competence. There is a high demand for technical skills in daily newsroom work (Nygren 2014: 77).



The newsroom culture in both *Bergens Tidende* and *Nordlys* might be described as pro-digital, with participants viewing digital news as an opportunity (Küng 2015: 106). Structural factors, such as technology, are important drivers for change (Steensen, 2016: 45). The innovative attitude and willingness to constantly change might also be an expression of the complex new technological infrastructure and demands; rapid technological changes make it necessary. The newsrooms fear being left behind if they fail to keep up with the pace of innovation, as competitors develop and change. At a basic level, however, this is also a struggle to stay socially relevant for the audience (Holand 2014).

### Societal role and democracy

We now turn to an exploration of the implications of these the genre innovations for society and democracy. Innovations are changes that imply bringing something new into the socio-economic system, and meeting social needs (Storsul & Krumsvik 2013). In this section, we address how the journalists and editors speak of and frame the societal role of journalism according to the innovation. How do the genre innovations shed light on how the informants perceive the institutional role of journalism?

Both newsrooms told us that their innovations went beyond mere technological development. *Nordlys'* goal in launching *Nordnorsk debatt* online was twofold: to establish a new online regional public debate for the population in the Northern part of Norway, and to strengthen their role as a voice on behalf of the region. Here is the chief editor of *Nordlys*:

*"Nordnorsk debatt will generate debate and reflection about Norway's Northern region. The audience perceives that it is having a national impact, because politicians and central authorities are reading us as well."*

The columnists confirm this statement, as all of them were concerned with their regional role and their responsibility to address regional issues in the national public debate. The organization's relationship to its geographical surroundings is a core element of this innovation: *Nordlys* aims to expand what is defined as local, to reach audiences in a larger geographical area, and to serve the national public with regional perspectives and viewpoints. Having a strong tradition as a distinct voice from the arctic region (Christensen & Tjelmeland 2002), this may not imply anything new; neither does opinion-based journalism as a genre in itself. The organization's ambition to expand rather than narrow the genre's scope, as well as to develop new types of columns,

represent change and newness. The new types of columns are eg. blogs, profiling the columnists, and the use of Facebook, stimulating more active in the dialogue between columnists and the readers. They are thus developing and transforming the traditional genre of opinion-based journalism (Steensen 2013: 45).

By highlighting the *regional* perspective, the newsroom is in many ways contrarian. First, as mentioned earlier, Norwegian regional newspapers have become more local than regional in recent years, especially in news journalism (Omdahl 2013, Engan 2016, Sjøvaag 2015), giving regional matters less coverage. Second, most news organizations in Norway find it more important to distribute information, than to stimulate public debate (Krumsvik 2015: 240ff). With *Nordnorsk debatt*, *Nordlys* is moving in the opposite direction of these trends: going regional and stimulating public debate. Digital technology is also changing the societal function of the genres, by offering new possibilities for interaction between the journalists and the regional audience.

While commentary journalism was a well-known genre at *Nordlys*, explanatory journalism was a rather new genre at *Bergens Tidende*, implying new and different ways of doing journalistic work. Its aim was to make political news journalism easier and more understandable for readers during coverage of the county and municipality election in 2015. As the editor told us:

*"It is important that people understand. Part of our societal mission is to explain why things happen, explain why in order to give people more insight. (...) Far too much journalism is created for people who are already following a given story, which means we exclude many readers. (...). Conveying background enables people to participate in the public debate."*

*Bergens Tidende* is concerned with developing the new format, making the content more relevant and understandable for the audience, especially the young. Simplification is important. One of the journalists argued that the digital presentation of the journalistic content should be a focus, adopting new ways of making journalism and developing formats: "We need to take the new formats and put something significant into them." Unlike *Nordlys*, *Bergens Tidende* did not aspire to a wider geographical scope, but did seek to reach new audiences and strengthen their relevance within their established area of coverage.

Both newsrooms aim to develop a genre. This might lead us to Schumpeter's (1939) distinction be-

tween invention and innovation: an innovation only happens when an invention is successfully placed in the market. The genres themselves are not new inventions, but the newsrooms strive to develop old genres into new formats, suited to the digital media landscape. The digital media landscape also offers new possibilities for reaching the young audience, as young people spend far more of their media time online than with print (Engan 2016; Curran et al. 2013).

Both newsrooms place significant value on their relationships with their geographical surroundings, but their approaches differ. *Bergens Tidende* connects the origin of its genre innovation to the local election in the city of Bergen and the surrounding municipalities – in other words: to sustain their role within their established area of coverage, and to educate citizens, especially the young. *Nordlys* connect their genre innovation to broaden their area of coverage, addressing regional matters and facilitating a regional public. The genre innovations become a means to strengthen their digital competence, striving to *expand* the audiences they reach and to *sustain* their democratic relevance in the digital age.

How do these journalists perceive their societal relevance? In *Bergens Tidende*, several interviewees use the concept of *education*. The editor justifies the innovation in relation to the public role of the newspaper:

*“One of our most important tasks is to raise our readers to citizens qualified to make decisions and have opinions. Being a citizen requires knowledge of societal structures. Our mission is educational.”*

One of the journalists offers similar views:

*“One of the core roles of the news media is to enable an educated public to participate and to stimulate debate. This requires a certain amount of background knowledge. Yet journalism often excludes citizens, because the content presupposes a foreknowledge the audience often lacks.”*

Improving public relevance thus appears to be an important aspect of how *Brif* developed. All the informants of *Bergens Tidende* used the concept of education in the interviews, underscoring the goal of explaining and giving the audience insight and context as citizens. They argue that *Brif* implies experimenting with formats, making the journalistic content easier to access and understand, and thereby strengthening its societal relevance.

We found similar expressions at *Nordlys*, where the editorial staff are concerned with the societal role of opinion-based journalism, including education, width, depth, analysis and facilitating public debate. One of the columnists states:

*“News reporting is volatile, quick and hurried. The audience is bombarded with news all the time. Commentary and explanatory journalism, in contrast, offer immersion.”*

Another columnist is concerned with “facilitating public debate and stimulating reflection”. Still another emphasizes the audience’s need for substance, content, opinion, and analysis:

*“The audience needs someone to analyze a fragmented reality and create meaning from impressions. People need help navigating.”*

In this context, *Nordlys* is especially concerned with its societal role in the regional public sphere, facilitating public debate on issues involving the entire region. These also have democratic implications tied to valuing the participation of diverse voices.

As the citations above reveal, both newsrooms legitimize their genre innovations and developments in relation to the social mission of journalism. Informants in both the newsrooms perceive that contextual journalism might offer a more valuable democratic gain than breaking news. They argue that contextual work is a critical reaction against speed (Neveu 2016: 451). The editors, the journalists, and the columnists are all concerned with the institutional and democratic role of their profession (Aalberg et al. 2015), with representing a societal good (Cook 1998, Allern & Pollack 2016).

The contemporary media crisis, with its cost-cutting and downsizing, provides ample reason to worry about how the news media will be able to fulfil its societal role, and how this will affect the institution of journalism as key part of the infrastructure of democracy. Our informants argued that innovating in the contextual genres strengthens the institutional values of journalism. But a critical discussion about whether prioritizing the contextual genres really strengthens the media’s impact is called for. The rise of opinion-based journalism has been criticized as being an unacceptable replacement for fact-based and investigative reporting (Patterson 2000), and for being a “cheap” kind of journalism, compared to resource-intensive feature stories or shoe-leather reporting (McNair 2008). Contextual journalism might be easily carried out by desktop work, inside the newsroom, rather than within the community (Nygren 2014, 94),

which risks producing a journalism more distant and less relevant to citizen readers.

Such critical objections notwithstanding, contextual journalism continues to represent a core element of journalism's societal purpose, conveying knowledge, insight, reflection and analysis. Media innovation can influence society's communicative capacity, alter different social rationales (Dogruel 2013: 38), and create more than economic value (Morlandstø & Krumsvik 2014: 25). Storsul and Krumsvik (2013: 17) define social innovation as a type of innovation that meets social needs. An important outcome of the two genre innovations we are studying might accordingly be at the institutional level of journalism, concerning the democratic objective, as both education and public debate also stimulate citizenship. This goes along with Barnhurst's (2013: 220) argument of citizenship as an important aspect of innovation, and Trappel's (2015: 13) argument about making something better for people and society.

#### Both "church and state"

So far, we have explored an innovative attitude among the informants, addressing how the newsrooms act out their institutional role as regional news media. This attitude legitimizes the genre innovations as tools for sustaining the relevance and democratic role of regional journalism.

However, at the same time several of the informants also drew our attention to the commercial and marketing potential of the innovations. They used words and concepts such as *branding*, *building audience loyalty*, *increasing online traffic*, and *capturing new audience groups* – commercial concepts that might be more easily associated with the language of marketers than with newsroom practitioners. Our informants spoke like this to varying degrees, however, and it is remarkable how they articulated these perspectives.

The chief editor of *Nordlys* emphasized financial goals when describing *Nordnorsk debatt*: "It has an economic rationale." Indeed, *Nordnorsk debatt* was launched and developed in parallel with downsizing and cost-cutting in the newsroom.<sup>6</sup> The chief editor argues that the media economy forces the newsroom to prioritize more, to discard some tasks or stories, and ensure the quality of those that remain. He describes the columns as premium or quality content, and the columnists as a brand:

*"We have to profile our columnists as branded goods to a larger degree than we used to (...). Branding creates digital engagement and audience loyalty. This represents a core value of our business, but we are also com-*

*pelled to align with it in order to strengthen the media economy."*

One of the columnists asserted that profiled columnists participating in a national debate program strengthen *Nordlys* as a brand. Another columnist mentioned the column's potential to draw digital readers and increase traffic, rather than generating direct revenue, as the innovative projects do not include advertising.

Our *Bergens Tidende* interviewees also underscore *Brif*'s marketing potential. As at *Nordlys*, the development of *Brif* is being carried out in parallel with downsizing and cutbacks at *Bergens Tidende*. One of the journalists states: "We try to recruit new digital subscribers, and to maintain the online traffic." His colleague states familiar expressions:

*"In the long term, reaching the youth demographic seems to be a smart strategy. It is a mix of branding and attracting new subscribers."*

By creating and launching *Nordnorsk Debatt* and *Brif*, both newsrooms aimed at journalistic as well as marketing gains. The editorial staff in both newsrooms discuss societal purpose and marketing goals in the same sentence. They interlink the economic and societal rationale for these innovations. On the one hand, they seek traditional core values of journalism, such as education and fostering public debate. At the same time, they are also concerned with branding, increasing online traffic, building audience loyalty and gaining new readers. The value of *Brif* or *Nordnorsk debatt* cannot be measured by revenue streams. They do not generate income based on advertising. Rather they might contribute to audience loyalty and the branding of the media companies. Editorial staff in both newsrooms are concerned with both the "church and state": they vaunt societal and democratic values and, in the same breath, highlight the marketing potential of the genre innovations.

This is hardly new; journalism and commerce has always been intertwined. The professional role of journalism emerged and developed in this tension between market and professional ideals (Ottosen 2015). Still, the professional ideals in journalism have been concerned with keeping the commercial considerations outside the newsroom. However, technological change has disrupted the formerly established walls between journalism and commerce (Westlund & Krumsvik 2014: 55). Studies show that Norwegian journalists are worried about commercial pressure (Ottosen 2015). On the other hand, a successful innovation requires a blend of jour-



nalistic, technological and commercial competencies (Küng 2013, 2015), as innovation is based on interactions between technological, economic, and social dimensions (Dogruel 2013: 29). Nonetheless, it appears that this blending and interaction leads to a stronger presence of commercial considerations within the newsrooms, alongside the professional journalistic considerations. Paulussen (2016: 195), however, stresses the need for an alignment and negotiation between journalism and commerce as a precondition for the innovation to be accepted within the newsroom. In both *Bergens Tidende* and *Nordlys*, the journalistic considerations are essential justifications for these genre innovations.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

In this article, we have examined journalists and editors in two newsrooms, both of which display a pro-digital culture, with a willingness to change and adapt: they perceive a constant state of change as necessary to sustain their relevance—to not be left behind. Digital technology is normalized (Nygren 2014: 76) and yet the newsrooms are facing rapid technological changes. Innovation in the contextual genres becomes a means of strengthening digital competence in the newsroom, and making them better equipped to meet digital challenges in the future. As such, we might state that the innovation of genres is motivated both externally and internally (Holand 2014).

The research question elaborated in this article is how regional newsrooms in Norway use genre innovation to develop and sustain their societal role in a democratic public sphere. Both of these newsrooms conceived of their innovations as going beyond mere technological development, the informants legitimize their genre innovation by citing the institutional role of the press. They value such democratic qualities as education, context, and public debate, and view the contextual journalism as a counterpart to the more accelerated digital 24/7 news reporting. Yet

the newsrooms are concerned with “state” as well as “church.” As much as they made reference to the benefits of their work for democracy, interviewees equally emphasized the importance of branding, expanding markets, increasing traffic numbers online, and audience loyalty.

The genre innovations do have societal implications, serving citizenship and democracy and improving people’s lives by offering easier access to complex political issues (*Brif*), as well as easier access to public debate (*Nordnorsk debatt*). The genre innovations become a means to sustain the societal and institutional role of journalism, in a time when commercial pressure, rapid technological change, and new forms of communication challenge the power and role of journalism. Developing these genres might offer a key to a renewed contract with an increasingly demanding and fragmented audience (Knapskog et al. 2015): serving the citizens’ context, as a critical reaction against the acceleration of news (La Masurier 2015; Neveu 2016). In this way, it might be a way to sustain the societal and institutional relevance of local and regional media.

The tension between the commercial and societal values of journalism seems to be becoming even stronger to the extent that the commercial considerations appear to have increased purchase on newsrooms, with the language of marketing living side by side with the professional journalistic concepts. Market pressure is putting journalism under threat. Developing the contextual genres might be seen in this light as a strategy to protect the institutional values of journalism and to sustain the role of journalism in the regional public sphere.

---

Date de soumission de l'article : 30 mars 2017  
Date d'acceptation : 14 juin 2018

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In English, “The High North Debate” or public debate in the northern region.

<sup>2</sup> The name *Brif* is the same as “brief” in English and comes from briefing, which is a short explanatory orientation or explanation of a phenomenon or an event.

<sup>3</sup> Clark’s essay was later re-published on the Poynter website and is today in use in a course at Poynter’s News University (<https://www.newsu.org>). See also Clark 2014.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.newsdeeply.com/>

<sup>5</sup> Other notable examples of explanatory journalism include the New York Times’ The Upshot and the website VOX.

<sup>6</sup> From 2013 to 2015, the number of employees at Nordlys fell from 52 to 37.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aalberg, T., Elvestad, E., Skogerbø, E., 2015, "Demokrati og offentlighet" [Democracy and the Public], in Ihlen, Ø., Skogerbø, E., Allern, S. (Eds.), *Makt, medier og politikk: Norsk politisk kommunikasjon* [Power, Media and Politics – Norwegian Political Communication], Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, pp. 22-34.
- Aldridge, M., 2007, *Understanding the Local Media*, New York, Open University Press.
- Allern, S., Pollack, E., 2016, "Journalistik som kollektiv nytta" [Journalism as Public Good], in Människorna, medierna och marknaden. Medietredningens forskningsantologi om en demokrati i förändring [Citizens, Media and the Market – A Democracy in Change], Stockholm, Wolters Kluwer, pp. 31-51.
- Barnhurst, K. G., 2013, "'Trust Me, I'm an Innovative Journalist,' and Other Fictions," in Peters, C., Broersma, M. (Eds.), *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*, London, Routledge, pp. 221-221.
- Boczkowski, P. J., 2004a, *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press.
- Boczkowski, P. J., 2004b, "The Processes of Adopting Multimedia and Interactivity in Three Online Newsrooms," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 54, no 2, pp. 197-213.
- Christensen, P., Tjelmeland, H., 2002, *Flammende budbringer. Nordlys gjennom 50 år* [Fiery Messenger: Nordlys through 50 Years], Tromsø, Nordlys.
- Cisarová, L. W. (Eds.), 2017, *Voice of the Locality: Local Media and Local Audience*, Prague, Masaryk University.
- Clark, R. P., 2014, March 24, "A New Explanatory Journalism Can Be Built on a Strong Foundation", Poynter, <https://www.poynter.org/news/new-explanatory-journalism-can-be-built-strong-foundation>.
- Cook, T. E., 1998, *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Curran, J. et al., 2013, "Internet Revolution Revisited: A Comparative Study of Online News," *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 5, no 7, pp. 880-897.
- Dogrul, L., 2013, "Opening the Black Box: The Conceptualising of Media Innovation," in Storsul, T., Krumsvik, A. H. (Eds.), *Media Innovations: A Multidisciplinary Study of Change*, Gothenburg, Nordicom, pp. 29-43.
- Eide, M., Sjøvaag, H., Larsen, L. O., (Eds.), 2016, *Journalism Re-examined. Digital Challenges and Professional Reorientations*, Bristol/Chicago, Intellect.
- Engan, B., 2016, *Bindeledd og grensesnitt. Lokalavisen som formidler av stedlig identitet, institusjonell politikk og medborgerskultur* [Link and Interface: The Local Newspaper as Disseminator of Local Identity, Institutional Politics and Civic Culture], Doctoral Thesis, Bodø, Nord universitet.
- Esser, F., Umbricht, A., 2014, "The Evolution of Objective and Interpretative Journalism in the Western Press: Comparing Six News Systems since the 1960s," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 91, no 2, pp. 229-249.
- Fink, K., Schudson, M., 2014, "The Rise of Contextual Journalism, 1950s-2000s," *Journalism*, vol. 15, no 1, pp. 3-20.
- Franklin, B., 2006, *Local Journalism and Local Media: Making the Local News*, London, Routledge.
- Hallin, D., Mancini, P., 2009, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.
- Holand, A. M., 2014, "Når fornyer lokalavisa seg?" [When Do Newspapers Innovate?], in Morlandstø, L., Krumsvik, A. H. (Eds.), *Innovasjon og verdiskaping i lokale medier* [Innovation and Value Creation in Local Media], Oslo, Cappelen Damm Akademisk, pp. 50-73.
- Howells, R., 2015, *Journey to the Centre of a News Black Hole: Examining the Democratic Deficit in a Town with No Newspaper*, Doctoral Thesis, Cardiff University.
- Høst, S., 2017, *Avisåret 2016* [Newspaper Annual, 2016], Volda, Høgskulen i Volda.
- Høst, S., 2005, *Det lokale avismønsteret: dekningsområder, mangfold og konkurranse 1972-2002* [The Local Patterns of Newspapers: Catchment Area, Pluralism and Competition 1972-2002], Fredrikstad, Institutt for journalistikk.
- Knapskog, K., Iversen, M. H., Larsen, L. O., 2016, "The Future of Interpretative Journalism," in Eide, M., Sjøvaag, H., Larsen, L. O. (Eds.), *Journalism Re-examined: Digital Challenges and Professional Reorientations*, Bristol, Intellect, pp. 163-181.
- Krumsvik, A. H., 2015, "Strategier for brukerinvolvering" [Strategies of User Involvement], in Vaagan, R. V., Barland, J. (Eds.), *Entreprenørskap og ledelse i media* [Entrepreneurship and Management in Media], Oslo, Cappelen Damm Forlag, pp. 233-247.
- Küng, L., 2013, "Innovation, Technology and Organizational Change: Legacy Media's Big Challenges: An Introduction," in Storsul, T., Krumsvik, A. H. (Eds.), *Media Innovations: A Multidisciplinary Study of Change*, Gothenburg, Nordicom, pp. 9-12.
- Küng, L., 2015, *Innovators in Digital News*, London, I.B. Tauris and Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Le Masurier, M., 2015, "What is Slow Journalism?" *Journalism Practice*, vol. 9, no 2, pp. 138-152.
- Mathisen, B. R., 2010, *Lokaljournalistikk. Blind patriotisme eller kritisk korrektiv?* [Local Journalism. Blind Patriotism or Critical Corrective?], Kristiansand, IJ-forlaget.
- Mathisen, B. R., Morlandstø, L., 2016, *Kommentaren – en sjanger i endring* [The Commentary – A Changing Genre], Oslo, Cappelen Damm Forlag.
- Mathisen, B. R., Morlandstø, L., (Eds.), 2018, *Lokale medier. Lokale medier. Samfunnsrolle, offentlighet og opinionsdanning* [Local media. Societal Role, Public Sphere and Opinionmaking], Oslo, Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Morlandstø, L., Krumsvik, A. H. (Eds.), 2014, *Innovasjon og verdiskaping i lokale medier* [Innovation and Value Creation in Local Media], Oslo, Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- McNair, B., 2008, "I, Columnist," in Franklin, B. (Ed.), *Pulling Newspapers Apart: Analyzing Print Journalism*, London, Routledge.
- Neveu, E., 2016, "On Not Going Too Fast with Slow Journalism," *Journalism Practice*, vol. 10, no 4, pp. 448-460.
- Nielsen, R. K. (Ed.), 2015, *Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media*, London, I.B. Tauris.
- Nygren, G., 2014, "Multiskilling in the Newsroom, De-skilling or Re-skilling of Journalistic Work?" *The Journal of Media Innovation*, vol. 1 no 2, pp. 75-96.
- Ottosen, R., 2015, "Crisis or Innovation? The Norwegian Journalist between Market and Ideals in the Multimedia Era," in Maxwell, R. (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Labor and Media*, London, pp. 202-217.
- Paulussen, S., 2016, "Innovation in the Newsroom," in Witschge, T., et al. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Digital Journalism*, London, Sage, pp. 192-207.
- Peters, C., Broersma, M. (Eds.), 2017, *Rethinking Journalism Again: Societal Role and Public Relevance in a Digital Age*, London, Routledge.
- Patterson, T., 2000, "The United States: News in a Free-Market society," in Gunther, R., Mughan, A. (Eds.), *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective*, New York, Cambridge University Press, pp. 241-266.
- Ramsay, G., Moore, M., 2016, *Monopolising Local News: Is There an Emerging Local Democratic Deficit in the UK Due to the Decline of Local Newspapers?* Center for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, Kings College, London.
- Ryfe, D. M., 2012, *Can Journalism Survive? An Inside Look at American Newsrooms*, Malden, MA, Polity Press.

- Salgado, S., Strömback, J., 2012, "Interpretive Journalism: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings," *Journalism*, vol. 13, no 2, pp. 144-161.
- Schumpeter, J., 1982 [1939], *Business Cycles: A Theoretical, Historical, and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process*, Philadelphia, Porcupine Press.
- Siles, I., Boczkowski, P. J., 2012, "Making Sense of the Newspaper Crisis: A Critical Assessment of Existing Research and an Agenda for Future Work," *New Media and Society*, vol. 14, no 8, pp. 1375-1394.
- Singer, J. B. et al., 2011, *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sjøvaag, H., 2015, "The Emergence of Metropolitan News: Shifting Concepts of Localism in Norwegian Regional Newspapers," *Nordicom Review*, vol. 36, no 2, pp. 17-32.
- Skogerbø, E., Windsvold, M., 2011, "Audiences on the Move? Use and Assessment of Local Print and Online Newspapers," *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 26, no 3, pp. 214-229.
- Steensen, S., 2009, "What's Stopping Them? Towards a Grounded Theory of Innovation in Online Journalism," *Journalism Studies*, vol. 10, no 6, pp. 821-836.
- Steensen, S., 2013, "Balancing the Bias: The Need for Counter-Discursive Perspectives in Media Innovation Research," in Storsul, T., Krumsvik, A. H. (Eds.), *Media Innovations: A Multidisciplinary Study of Change*, Gothenburg, Nordicom, pp. 45-59.
- Steensen, S., 2016, "The Intimization of Journalism," in Witschge, T. et al. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Digital Journalism*, London, Sage, pp. 113-128.
- Storsul T., Krumsvik, A. H. (Eds.), 2013, *Media Innovations: A Multidisciplinary Study of Change*, Gothenburg, Nordicom.
- Trappel, J., 2015, "What to Study When Studying Media and Communication Innovation? Research Design for the Digital Age," *Journal of Media Innovation*, vol. 2, no 1, pp. 7-22.
- Vaage, O. F., 2017, *Norsk mediebarometer 2016 [The Media Barometer 2016]*, Oslo, Statistisk sentralbyrå.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K., Hanitsch, T. (Eds.), 2009, *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, New York, Routledge.
- Waldahl, R., 2007, *Opinion og demokrati [Opinion and Democracy]*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.
- Williams, A., Harte, D., Turner, J., 2014, "The Value of UK Hyperlocal Community News," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 3, no 5, pp. 680-703.





---

## ABSTRACT | RESUMÉ | RÉSUMO

---

### **Innovative Contextual Genres:**

A Strategy to Sustain Regional Democratic Relevance?

### **Genres contextuels innovants :**

Une stratégie pour maintenir une pertinence démocratique régionale ?

### **Gêneros contextuais inovadores:**

Uma estratégia para sustentar a relevância da democracia regional?

**En** This paper examines regional newsrooms and how they use genre innovation to develop and sustain their societal role in the democratic public sphere. The study draws upon both innovation theory and institutional theory and is based on five semi-structured interviews conducted in each of two regional newsrooms in Norway: Nordlys and Bergens Tidende. In the European context, Norway stands out because of its characteristically decentralized press structure and high newspaper readership and circulation. Norwegian regional media, however, are not immune to the media crisis generated by rapid technological change and the ensuing need to innovate in order to sustain influence. An analysis of the regional Nordlys and Bergens Tidende reveals a pro-digital culture in which journalists and editors are well aware of the state of constant flux, and that adapting is the only way to stay relevant. Nordlys has pioneered online commentary journalism, while Bergens Tidende has advanced the explanatory journalism genre. Both might be characterized as examples of contextual journalism, which has seen a significant rise in recent years. Contextual journalism represents a core element of journalism's societal purpose—convey knowledge and analyze. This study found that genre innovations become a means to strengthen digital competence in newsrooms. Furthermore, these genre innovations are legitimized by the institutional role of the press, serving the citizenship and democracy, and strengthening the societal relevance of regional media. There seems to exist a tension between commerce and ideals, however, as interviewees emphasized both the marketing potential and the democratic value of these genres. Developing contextual genres might be seen as a strategy to protect the institutional value of journalism and sustain its role in the regional public sphere.

**Keywords:** Contextual journalism, explanatory journalism, opinion-based journalism, regional media, institutional role, media innovation, genre innovation

**Fr** Cet article examine les salles de rédaction régionales et leur utilisation des innovations de genre pour développer et pérenniser leur rôle sociétal dans la sphère publique démocratique. L'étude s'appuie à la fois sur la théorie de l'innovation et sur la théorie institutionnelle. Elle s'appuie sur cinq entretiens semi-structurés menés dans chacune des deux salles de rédaction régionales en Norvège : Nordlys et Bergens Tidende. Dans le contexte européen, la Norvège se distingue par sa structure de sa presse particulièrement décentralisée ainsi que par son lectorat et son tirage élevés. Les médias régionaux norvégiens, cependant, ne sont pas à l'abri de la crise engendrée par les changements technologiques rapides et la nécessité d'innover qui s'ensuit pour maintenir leur influence. Une analyse édition régionales de Nordlys et Bergens Tidende révèle une culture pro-numérique dans laquelle les journalistes et les rédacteurs en chef sont bien conscients de l'évolution constante de la situation et du fait que l'adaptation est le seul moyen de rester pertinent. Nordlys a été le pionnier du journalisme de commentaire en ligne, tandis que Bergens Tidende a fait progresser le genre du journalisme d'explication. Tous deux pourraient être qualifiés d'exemples de journalisme contextuel, qui a connu une augmentation

significative ces dernières années. Le journalisme contextuel représente un élément central de l'objectif sociétal du journalisme —transmettre des connaissances et analyser des informations. Cette étude révèle que les innovations de genre deviennent un moyen de renforcer les compétences numériques dans les salles de rédaction. De plus, ces innovations de genre sont légitimées par le rôle institutionnel de la presse (au service de la citoyenneté et de la démocratie), et par le renforcement de la pertinence sociétale des médias régionaux. Il semble toutefois exister une tension entre le commerce et les idéaux, les personnes interrogées soulignant à la fois le potentiel marketing et la valeur démocratique de ces genres. Le développement de genres contextuels pourrait être considéré comme une stratégie visant à protéger la valeur institutionnelle du journalisme et à maintenir son rôle dans la sphère publique régionale.

**Mots-clés :** Journalism contextuel, journalism d'explication, journalism d'opinion, média régional, rôle institutionnel, innovation médiatique, innovation de genre.

**Pt.** Este paper examina as redações regionais e como eles se utilizam de gêneros inovadores para desenvolver e sustentar o seu papel societário na esfera pública democrática. O estudo se ampara tanto na teoria da inovação como na teoria institucional, ele é baseado em duas séries de cinco entrevistas semiestruturadas conduzidas em redações regionais da Noruega: Nordlys e Bergens Tidende. No contexto europeu, a Noruega se destaca por se caracterizar por uma estrutura de imprensa descentralizada e por um alto índice de leitura e de circulação de jornais. A mídia regional norueguesa, contudo, não está imune à crise da mídia gerada pela rápida mudança tecnológica e pela consequente necessidade de inovar para manter sua influência. Uma análise dos veículos regionais Nordlys e Bergens Tidende revela uma cultura pró-digital na qual jornalistas e editores estão bastante cientes da situação de constante fluxo de inovações, e de que a adaptação é a única forma de se manterem relevantes. Nordlys tem se mostrado pioneiro nos comentários on-line no jornalismo, já o Bergens Tidende tem avançado no gênero do jornalismo explanatório. Ambos podem ser caracterizados como exemplos de jornalismo contextual, o qual têm visto um expressivo crescimento nos últimos anos. O jornalismo contextual representa um elemento central da proposta societária do jornalismo – transmitir e analisar o conhecimento. Este estudo observou que os gêneros inovadores se constituíram em uma forma de fortalecer a competência digital nas redações. Além disso, esses gêneros inovadores são legitimados pelo papel institucional da imprensa, servindo à cidadania e à democracia, e fortalecendo a relevância societária da mídia regional. Parece haver uma tensão entre as dimensões comercial e das ideias, contudo, as entrevistas enfatizaram tanto o potencial para o marketing como os valores democráticos desses gêneros. O desenvolvimento de gêneros contextuais parece ser visto como uma estratégia para proteger o valor institucional do jornalismo e sustentar o seu papel na esfera pública regional.

**Palavras-chave:** Jornalismo contextual, jornalismo explanatório, jornalismo baseado em opiniões, mídia regional, papel institucional, inovação na mídia, inovação de gênero